

The Hidden Rules of Bigotry

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Who is good? And who is better?

We make these value judgments all the time, and for good reason, about individuals. But most of us have been taught not to make such judgments about groups of people. Equality is a core principle of American society, and it's unjust—or at least politically incorrect—to subscribe to social hierarchies.

But such explicit hierarchies have played a powerful role in American history, and many believe that they still do—in a more subterranean fashion. Indeed, some psychological scientists suspect that rules of superiority and inferiority are still alive and well in the American psyche, shaping our judgments of race and religion and even age in subtle ways.

University of Virginia scientists Jordan Axt, Charles Ebersole and Brian Nosek wondered not only if social hierarchies persist in the American social memory, but if the same unacknowledged hierarchies are widely endorsed by members of different social groups. One would expect group members to favor their own—old fashion favoritism—but how about beyond that? Do people—regardless of their own race and religion and age—have favored (and disfavored) groups that they do not publicly—or consciously—proclaim?

The scientists used the Implicit Association Test to investigate how positively or negatively people feel—without knowing it—about certain racial groups, religions and age groups, including their own. In three separate studies, they asked very large numbers of respondents about their own demographics and about their explicit feelings regarding race, religion and age. Then the respondents completed a version of the IAT that tapped into their unconscious feelings toward the same groups. The idea was to see how in-group favoritism, conscious ideals of fairness, and enduring biases all interact to shape group dynamics today.

The results were intriguing. Despite society's formal disapproval of hierarchies in social status, people unconsciously rank order others by race and religion and, with an interesting twist, by age. What's more these hierarchies appear to be unvarying, regardless of who is doing the evaluating. With race, for example, all groups value their own racial group the most, but then rank the other groups in identical order: White, Asian, Black, Hispanic. Similarly with religion, all groups rank their own religion highest, followed by the others in this precise order: Christian, Jew, Hindu/Buddhist, Muslim. Even respondents who identify with none of these groups—even they endorsed these same hierarchies. These implicit hierarchies did not match the explicit evaluations of race and religion, which are less consistent.

Age showed an interesting departure from this invariant pattern: Regardless of the respondents' own age, all valued children the most, then young adults, middle-age adults, and finally older adults. In other words, even the oldest ranked themselves lowest in the age hierarchy. When it comes to age, it appears that group favoritism is swamped by the widespread view that younger is better.

The results taken together, and reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, suggest that hierarchies are pervasively embedded in social minds, all the instruction to the contrary notwithstanding. But there were some interesting if perplexing anomalies in the findings. For example, Blacks appear to be viewed more favorably than Hispanics, though in much past research Blacks have occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder. This may indicate a negative shift in implicit attitude towards Hispanics in American society. In another departure from the pattern, Buddhists got unusually favorable evaluations from non-religious respondents, though it's unclear why. To encourage further analysis of these and other patterns, the scientists have made the data and materials available [here](#).

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